

9. A Current Assessment and Contending Options

After almost 10 years of effort, U.S. and coalition prospects in Afghanistan will be influenced by 5 vectors.¹ U.S. interests remain a guide and provide the first vector. Two American Presidents over a decade have declared that the war is a vital national interest. Nearly a decade after the 9/11 attack, the current administration is still rightfully focused on the defeat or degradation of al Qaeda and its associated movements, one of which is the Afghan Taliban.

The war in Afghanistan has also become the main effort in the U.S. war on terrorism. President Obama in the first 18 months of his administration twice reinforced our Afghanistan contingent. Friendly forces—U.S., allied, and Afghan—in the fall of 2010 included 384,000 military and police personnel, more than 10 times the estimated size of the full-time Taliban fighting force.² In his first 20 months in office, according to the New America Foundation, President Obama nearly tripled the total Bush administration 2007–2008 drone strikes against terrorist targets in Pakistan. In 2010, by the end of September, the administration had conducted 50 percent more strikes than it did in all of 2009.³ In a May 2010 state visit to Washington, President Karzai also received a promise from the Obama administration of a long-term strategic relationship that will cement the U.S.-Afghan partnership beyond the sound of the guns. Vice President Biden reiterated this promise during a visit to Kabul in January 2011.⁴

Second, the costs have been considerable. For the United States, the war has gone on nearly 10 years. For Afghanistan, spring 2011 marks more than three decades of uninterrupted war. By mid-2011, over 1,500 U.S. war dead, 900 fallen allies, and tens of thousands of Afghan dead

bear silent witness to the high cost of this protracted conflict.⁵ Pakistan has suffered over 30,000 casualties during the war on terrorism.⁶ In a 2010 visit to Washington, General Ashfaq Kayani, the Pakistani army chief, reminded his U.S. audiences that in 2009 alone, the Pakistani army suffered 10,000 casualties in its battles against the Pakistani Taliban. Nearly 3,000 members of the Afghan security forces were killed in action from 2007 to 2009. Afghan civilian dead averaged approximately 2,000 per year from 2008 to 2010.⁷

The commitment of NATO nations on both sides of the Atlantic is politically uncertain. In Europe, delicate coalition governments are dealing with significant fiscal problems and low public support for fighting in Afghanistan. American pleas in 2010 for a larger European contribution have been met, but most European and Canadian combat contingents will likely be withdrawn in the next few years. War weariness among all combatants is likely to be a significant change agent as nations count down to 2014, the Lisbon Summit target for the nationwide Afghan takeover of security. Polls in the United States in 2010 showed less than 40 percent of the public supporting the war. U.S. public support was even lower in 2011 polls. At the same time, U.S. voters did not consider the war to be a top-tier electoral issue, as it has been in elections in Canada and the Netherlands.

Popular support for the war has been much lower in Europe than in the United States.⁸ While 49 nations are in the NATO-led coalition, burden- and risk-sharing have remained problems. Only Afghanistan, Canada, Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, the United States, and a few other nations pursue full-time offensive combat operations. Washington also outstrips its allies in security- and foreign-assistance spending. Still, the allies added close to 10,000 personnel to their strength in the

surge and have suffered over 900 deaths during the war. One recent study found that seven allied nations have taken more fatalities per number of deployed soldiers than the United States. A recent RAND study that measured casualties according to the total end strength in each country's armed forces found 4 nations with more casualties per 100,000 personnel on their rolls than the United States.⁹

U.S. war expenditures in FY10 and FY11 will top \$100 billion.¹⁰ This enormous cost—on behalf of a country whose legal gross domestic product (measured in purchasing power parity) is about a fifth of the U.S. budgetary allocation—comes at a time of high unemployment and rampant deficit spending in the United States. In the midterm, budgetary constraints in the United States and Europe will begin to influence how the coalition pursues its objectives in Afghanistan. Between fiscal and strategic concerns, there are growing antiwar issues on both sides of the congressional aisle, with some worried about costs, some worried about corruption, and still others concerned that our expansive strategy is out of touch with our true interests.

Third, the enemy—generally successful from 2005 to 2009—is under great pressure from the coalition on Afghan battlefields. Pakistan is slowly awakening to the danger of harboring violent extremist groups on its territory. Its soldiers have fought a war in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and South Waziristan to make that point. A massive flood in Pakistan put the war there on hold in the summer and fall of 2010. In Afghanistan, major allied offensives in the Pashtun-dominated south and east of Afghanistan highlighted the coalition's determination. U.S. Treasury experts on al Qaeda funding have stepped up activities against the Taliban's financiers.¹¹ One of the three major elements of the Afghan Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami faction, has been in contact with the Karzai

government. Another part of the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, with close ISI and al Qaeda connections, has reportedly begun exploratory talks, using Pakistan as an intermediary.¹²

This process has a long way to go. In June 2010, Leon Panetta, the head of the CIA, said: “We have seen no evidence that they [that is, the Taliban] are truly interested in reconciliation, where they would surrender their arms, where they would denounce al Qaeda, where they would really try to become part of that society.”¹³ The Taliban is neither down nor out, but for the first time since the fall of 2001, it is feeling serious pressure from both its enemies and its benefactors. Reconciliation efforts are still in an infant stage.

Fourth, President Karzai’s weak government remains the Taliban’s best talking point. The government that must win this war seems in some ways less capable than it was in the 2002–2005 period. The police are a hindrance, the bureaucrats are inefficient and corrupt, and the ministries are ineffective. The narcotics industry may be a third the size of the entire legal economy. The effect of narcotics trafficking on Taliban funding and government corruption is profound. Still, the government stands far higher in polls than the Taliban. In the June 2010 Asia Foundation survey, public optimism in Afghanistan was at a 5-year high, as was the public evaluation of government performance.¹⁴ Indeed, the government remains far more popular among Afghans than either the United States or coalition forces.

The level of governmental corruption was evident in the recent presidential election. Only the withdrawal of Karzai’s most serious competitor, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, who in all likelihood did not have the votes to win a runoff, enabled the current president to be legitimately called the winner. Public bickering in 2010 had U.S. officials embarrassing Karzai by their public statements, while he bitterly

denounced the United States and NATO for acting as occupiers, even once out of frustration suggesting that he might as well join the Taliban. His mid-May 2010 visit to Washington poured oil on these troubled waters, but in the run-up to the September 2010 parliamentary elections, President Karzai appeared to be directly interfering with corruption investigations into his government. The subsequent parliamentary election was problematical but was clearly more legitimate than the previous presidential election. Karzai was reportedly disturbed by the inability to open polls in some conflict areas in the south and east, traditional Pashtun strongholds. By the time the counting was done, there were 15 fewer Pashtun legislators than in the previous parliament.

In the past, friction had been present within the U.S. team—the Embassy, Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke’s group, and the military command. It was a factor in the improper and ill-timed complaints by General McChrystal and his staff to a reporter that resulted in the General’s ouster from command.¹⁵ By the fall of 2010, however, friction appeared to have abated if press articles were an appropriate gauge. How the untimely death of Ambassador Holbrooke will affect this situation is unknown. While he could be hard to deal with, Holbrooke was a master negotiator and a consummate diplomat. His efforts toward a better peace will be sorely missed.

Despite much economic aid, Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries in the world. But there are a few economic bright spots: fueled by aid, legal gross domestic product growth has been robust, and in 2010 the Karzai government increased revenue collection by 58 percent. Development programs such as the National Solidarity Program, which have exploited community councils and local decisionmaking, have been extremely successful. Local management means buy-in

by the local population and great savings. In the 8 years of its existence, the NSP has affected 26,000 village communities with \$631 million worth of projects.¹⁶ The international community has agreed to funnel 50 percent of its annual aid through the Afghan state budget by 2012.¹⁷ On Washington's end, the new ISAF COIN Contracting Guidance will help U.S. forces from indirectly contributing to local corruption.¹⁸ By January 2011, the Afghan government had also aggressively begun to license the development of what may amount to \$3 trillion worth of mineral deposits. In the long run, this mineral wealth could be a way out of underdevelopment for Afghanistan.¹⁹

Finally, the Afghan people are tired of war and the intrusive presence of coalition forces. While ISAF-involved civilian deaths and collateral damage were way down in 2010, the presence of coalition forces is no doubt hard for many Afghans to live with. Fortunately, for the most part, the people despise the Taliban more than the government and its coalition partners. The Taliban rarely receive higher than 10 percent approval ratings in polls. Most people seem able to remember how repressive and ineffective the Taliban was at ruling the country from 1996 to 2001. With 49 nations helping the government, the attentive public no doubt recalls that the Taliban regime was recognized by only 3 other countries. Before looking at policy options, it will therefore be helpful to discuss the international dimension of the conflict in Afghanistan.

The International Dimension

The interests of six regional players—China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, each powerful in its own way—will have an important impact on the war and its settlement. Each of these nations will work hard to accomplish its own goals in and toward Afghanistan.

They are part of the policy milieu and in some cases part of the problem. They will all have to become part of the solution.

Russia has a long history with Afghanistan. It has legitimate commercial interests and is vitally interested in keeping radical Islamists away from its borders. Russia is also vitally concerned with preventing the spread of narcotics and the movement of drugs through its territory. It has long and deep relations with the numbers of the former Northern Alliance. It can be helpful in a settlement or it can be a spoiler. Afghanistan, for its part, might well see Russia as a source of security assistance, especially given the amount of former Warsaw Pact materiel in Kabul's armories.

India's prime interest is to spread its influence and keep Afghanistan from becoming a pawn of its enemy, Pakistan.²⁰ For decades, and especially since the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, counterterrorism remains uppermost in the minds of Indian leaders. They see Pakistan as maintaining close relationships with a number of radical groups, including the Haqqani Network and Lashkar-i-Taiba, the latter singled out in a recent Council on Foreign Relations study as a potential rival to "al-Qaeda as the world's most sophisticated and dangerous terrorist organization."²¹ India also keeps one eye on China, a close ally of Islamabad as well as India's rival for power in South Asia. For its part, China is exploiting its interests in Afghanistan for commercial reasons and to dampen Islamist extremism, a problem in the western part of China.

Not invited by Kabul to use military instruments in Afghanistan, New Delhi has committed over \$1 billion in aid and pledged another \$1 billion. It is fast improving its commercial ties, and Indian contractors and firms run many large projects inside the country. The Indian government no doubt maintains contacts with its old friends, the Tajiks

and Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan. India has also linked up with Iran in bypassing Pakistani land routes into Afghanistan by improving the flow of supplies from the port of Charbahar in southeast Iran to Zaranj in Afghanistan, and then on to Delaram on the Ring Road in western Afghanistan. India has a secure route for its exports, which have Afghan trade preferences, and Iran is developing a close relationship with a highly regarded emerging power. Pakistan is concerned about the growing demi-alliance between Iran and India, as well as the proximity of the commercial and maritime hub of Charbahar close to its own territory.

Islamabad's prime interest is to have a friendly, pliable regime in Afghanistan, which some of its strategists see as its strategic rear area, and also a regime that recognizes Pakistan's interests. As always, its sharpest eye is on India. Islamabad wants to block any extension of New Delhi's influence in Afghanistan. It also believes that India is actively undermining its security interests by using its extensive presence in Afghanistan to work with the Pakistani Taliban and Baluch insurgent groups. Islamabad has accordingly begun to cooperate more closely with the Afghan government.

Pakistan supported the Taliban until 2001, and then, pledges to the United States aside, allowed it to reoccupy sanctuaries inside Pakistan in Quetta, Karachi, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and throughout the northwest of Pakistan. The Pakistani leadership, however, is tiring of the Afghan Taliban, who maintain low-key relations with the Pakistani Taliban, which is currently at war with Islamabad. The Afghan Taliban in its various guises was once a solution to Pakistan's Afghanistan problem, but today it is an impediment to a new settlement. In the fall of 2010, with pressure from NATO, it appeared that the government of Pakistan had begun to push the Taliban toward negotiations with the Karzai government. Although Islamabad has never had better cooperation with

the current Afghan regime, it is no doubt hedging its bets for the future, worried about continuing instability, a vacuum left by a rapid departure of ISAF combat forces, and Indian gains in the country at the perceived expense of Pakistan's security.

The degree of help the coalition gets from Islamabad will be a key variable in fighting or negotiating with the Taliban. Increased Pakistani pressure on the Afghan Taliban could dramatically speed up reconciliation. The government of Pakistan, however, must cope with competing national objectives and a population in which "most Pakistanis will remain young, poor, uneducated and brimming with anti-Americanism."²² The United States must continue to insist that Pakistan take action to control U.S. and Afghan enemies that reside on its soil.

For its part, Saudi Arabia is eager to facilitate reconciliation and continue its support for its old friend Pakistan, no doubt with one eye on Iran's activities. It has tried hard to jump-start the peace process in the hope of countering al Qaeda. Sadly, the Taliban has stiff-armed the Saudis on the al Qaeda issue. Saudi cash could be a great boon to reconciliation and a major aid source for Afghanistan.

Iran has had poor relations with the Taliban, which mistreated Shia Afghans and on one occasion killed Iranian consular officials in northern Afghanistan. Although it has provided some covert aid to the Taliban insurgents, it is not eager to have a Taliban government on its border. Tehran is also concerned about refugees, instability, and narcotics traffic across its porous border. At the same time, it does not want an American position of strength in Afghanistan, and it would love to see the war there become an embarrassment to the United States. Iran must also wonder whether Afghanistan would provide bases to the United States if a conflict were to arise over Iranian nuclear proliferation. Additionally,

Tehran is concerned about its long border with Afghanistan, cross-border instability, smuggling, and narcotics trafficking. Accordingly, it has a two-track policy of covert aid to insurgents and overt aid to Afghan authorities in Kabul and along Iran's eastern border. Shared interests have helped Tehran's relations with India grow stronger as the conflict continues.

In all, there is a tangle of competing interests and policies among the regional powers. The six big regional players, four of which are nuclear powers and one that is building that capability, will insist that any solution or reconciliation in Afghanistan does not work against their interests. To that end, an understanding among them on the future of Afghanistan will be critical to the country's long-term stability.

Options for the Future

Among the catalysts for strategic change in Afghanistan have been a surge of U.S. forces and civilian officials, increases in aid, and the President's declaration at West Point that in July 2011 "our troops will begin to come home." On that date, the coalition will start to transition responsibility for security in selected areas to the Afghan government. At the Lisbon Summit, NATO made 2014 the target for the Afghans to take over security nationwide. President Karzai first agreed to the 2014 date in the spring of 2010 and said as much at his appearance at the U.S. Institute of Peace.²³ President Obama and his Secretaries of State and Defense have all stressed that this withdrawal of combat forces will be "conditions based" and supplemented by a new strategic relationship with Afghanistan and Pakistan for the long term.

Four types of options will dominate the thought process in July 2011 and over the next few years. First, there will no doubt be some key players who favor continuing with the comprehensive COIN effort that is still

unfolding. Many security specialists will prefer to keep up the full-blown counterinsurgency operation for a few more years and move slowly on the transition to Afghan responsibility for security, and only then on to reconciliation with the enemy. A few more years of the COIN approach would give the time needed for building Afghan capacity, but it would be expensive and play into enemy propaganda about the coalition as an occupying force. The Lisbon Summit goal of a transition to Afghan responsibility for security in 2014 favors a “more COIN” option, but expense, public opinion, and the ongoing budget deficit crunch will work against many more years of robust COIN efforts at the current level.

A second option touted by those interested primarily in al Qaeda or saving money is to abandon the complex counterinsurgency/nation-building focus and shift to a sole emphasis on counterterrorism. While counterterrorism has been an important part of option one, counterterrorism by itself does not work to strengthen the Afghan state so it can do business on its own. Without such help, the need for aid to Afghanistan will become unending. Absence of such help also retards the collection of local intelligence. Failing to secure the population will allow progress by insurgents and will also put forces engaged in counterterrorism in Afghanistan at higher personal risk. One highly sensitive assumption underpinning counterterrorism-only proposals is that there is a great dividing line between even the hardcore Taliban and al Qaeda. This is not the case. Many hardcore Taliban leaders are clearly found in the greater constellation of al Qaeda and its Associated Movements. This fact will be explored in depth in the next section. A final factor that would argue against a counterterrorism-only approach has been the strength of the kinetic operations inside Afghanistan and the aggressive drone attacks in Pakistan. The effectiveness of counterterrorist and counterinsurgency operations inside of the current COIN approach has been remarkable.

A third option would be to reduce over a few years many or most of the 30,000 Soldiers and Marines in the surge combat forces and make security assistance and capacity building—not the provision of combat forces—ISAF’s top priority. Remaining ISAF combat units could further integrate with fielded ANA units. Maximum emphasis would be placed on quality training for soldiers and police.

To help build Afghan military capacity, ISAF commanders would also emphasize the development of Afghan combat enablers such as logistics, transportation, and aviation. In this option, ISAF would shift the focal point of allied strategy to the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan vice allied combat forces. This option would not be cheap, but it could gradually bring down costs and troop levels. Trading U.S. combat units for ANA formations, however, may result in some short-term security degradation, a real problem if negotiations are ongoing. The integration of ISAF combat units with ANA units has paid great training dividends in just a few years. One more problem is the sustainment of ANSF funding. The current cost of the ANP and ANA is about five times the amount of all of Afghanistan’s annual revenue. In the long run, the government will have to make serious adjustments to ensure that the ANSF can be supported with local revenues. Downsizing, conscription, and enhanced revenue collection could be among the potential fixes.

Other challenges may arise with this option. U.S. and allied trainer/advisor shortages will have to be filled rapidly, which will be difficult. In a similar vein, the training and education of Afghan civil servants will need much more attention along with additional trainer/advisors. To bring this about, the coalition also needs to reinforce support to the national government, its ministries, and its local appointees. Coalition

civilian advisors must become the norm in every ministry and throughout their subdivisions.

The key to success here is and will remain the Afghan police, who will be vital to defeating the insurgency. Efforts to improve their training are essential. Rule of law programs such as courts, jails, and legal services must also be improved if this government will ever rival Taliban dispute resolution mechanisms. The Ministry of the Interior will have to defeat its endemic corruption. The appointment of General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, formerly chief of the general staff, as the minister of the interior may provide a needed impetus for change. The development of the Afghan Local Police—trained by U.S. Special Forces, tied to local shuras, and supervised by the Ministry of the Interior—is both a favorable development and a challenge. By February 2011, there were over 30 districts, with nearly 10,000 local police in training or already validated.²⁴ As noted above, this program could easily become counterproductive without good training and supervision.

For its part, the government of Afghanistan—which ultimately must win its own war—must work harder against corruption and redouble its efforts to develop its own capacity in every field of endeavor. Links between the center and the provinces must be strengthened. The civilian part of the U.S. surge must clearly be maintained for a few more years.²⁵

A Fourth Option: Reconciliation (and Its Obstacles)

A fourth option—compatible with the options noted above, either sequentially or concurrently—is for the Afghan government, with coalition and UN support, to move expeditiously on reintegration of individual Taliban fighters and reconciliation with parts of or even with whole elements of the Afghan Taliban. Over 1,000 individual

fighters have volunteered for the reintegration program.²⁶ To make systemic progress, however, President Karzai first will have to win over the majority of the Afghan population who are not Pashtuns, a hard sell. They will want peace but not at a price that threatens them or allows a “new” Taliban much latitude. To help address this problem, President Karzai held a loya jirga on peace issues in June 2010. He wisely appointed Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik and former Northern Alliance leader, to lead the High Peace Council. No Afghan will be able to accuse the Council of being biased toward certain individuals or Pashtun tribes.

For their part, the Taliban leadership will also be a hard sell. The year 2009 was the worst year for fighting since 2002. While they are feeling the heat in 2010, the Taliban still claim to have the momentum. The last few years have been a time of increasing Taliban battlefield successes and growing Western casualties. They have attacked cities, they exert control over some provinces, and they have shadow governors appointed for, but not necessarily working in, each province. Many in the Taliban leadership cadres are not eager to negotiate, but the U.S. surge and Pakistani pressure could change their minds.

While few would disagree with welcoming individual Taliban back into the fold, a political deal with the movement will be difficult to manage. If the Afghan government sits down prematurely with a major element of the Taliban, it may be acting from a position of weakness. To increase the prospects for Kabul’s success in negotiating, the coalition will have to reverse that weakness. In plain language, ISAF will have to strike a decisive blow against the Taliban and fracture its organization while holding out the carrot of a settle-

ment. Pakistan will have to join these efforts to push elements of the Taliban toward reconciliation.

Negotiators will have to deal with a number of complicating factors. For one, the Taliban has many factions. The original Taliban, the so-called Quetta Shura Taliban, works in the southern part of Afghanistan. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction of Hezb-i-Islami, which has been at war in various configurations since 1978, operates in the eastern part of the country, as does the Haqqani Network, whose headquarters is in North Waziristan. Complicating the issue, there are now multiple Pakistani Taliban factions, some operating in both countries. When we talk to the Taliban, we will have to deal with its many parts. The divisions among groups provide the coalition opportunities to use divide and conquer tactics. In the end, it is likely that some factions may reconcile while others fight on.

Second, all politics is local, and in Afghanistan that means ethnic or tribal. Pashtuns are only about 40 percent of the Afghan population, and the balance of the population—Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, and others—were treated harshly by the Taliban. While Pashtuns may see some of the Taliban as wayward relatives, non-Pashtuns are likely to be less forgiving. A premature political reconciliation could increase Pashtun versus non-Pashtun tensions. The worst reconciliation nightmare would be a civil war with reconciled Pashtuns against nearly everyone else in Afghanistan. It will be hard to bring all of the ethnic groups on board, but war weariness and the need for development aid are powerful incentives to forgive and forget. Positive Pakistani efforts could increase Taliban motivation to reenter the political system.

Third, the Taliban regime also committed numerous crimes against humanity for which there has never been an accounting. In

addition to the extreme repression of the entire citizenry including no kites, no music, no female education, bizarre human rights practices, and executions at soccer matches, thousands of Afghans, especially non-Pashtuns, were killed by the Taliban. Compounding that problem, the contemporary Taliban use terror tactics and repression. Even today, when they are trying to attract more followers with propaganda and sharia-based dispute resolution, their approval ratings in most polls are low.

While Karzai will demand that they accept the constitution, the Taliban reject democracy and may insist on a withdrawal of coalition forces, Karzai's insurance policy, before they sign on to reconciliation. Today's Taliban are unlawful combatants who live by planting IEDs, kidnapping civilians, and destroying reconstruction projects in the countryside. It will be difficult to sit down to negotiate with players whose signature tactics include burning girls' schools and beheading noncombatants. Even Mullah Omar has counseled restraint to soften the Taliban image.²⁷ Clearly, mainstream Taliban leaders will have to turn their back on their "worst practices."

Finally, there may be a tendency to see the Taliban as misguided fundamentalist bumpkins with their leadership cadres in a league with al Qaeda. Since 1998, they have resisted all requests to turn over or even disavow Osama bin Laden and his followers. In 2001, the Taliban were ousted from their home for protecting their "guest," Osama bin Laden, with his thousands of foreign fighters. While al Qaeda was once a more powerful partner, it is still able to advise Taliban commanders and teach them the finer points of IEDs and suicide bombing techniques. The al Qaeda-Taliban link may be stronger today than it was in 2001.

According to Dexter Filkins writing in the *New York Times*, no less a figure than Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah in the summer of 2008 asked Mullah Omar to disavow in writing a link between the Taliban and al Qaeda. He never received an answer.²⁸ David Rohde of the *New York Times*, who was kidnapped by the Haqqani Network for 7 months, believes the al Qaeda–Taliban link is thriving. Rohde wrote in October 2009:

*Over those months [in captivity], I came to a simple realization. After seven years of reporting in the region, I did not fully understand how extreme many of the Taliban had become. Before the kidnapping, I viewed the organization as a form of “Al Qaeda lite,” a religiously motivated movement primarily focused on controlling Afghanistan. Living side by side with the Haqqanis’ followers, I learned that the goal of the hard-line Taliban was far more ambitious. Contact with foreign militants in the tribal areas appeared to have deeply affected many young Taliban fighters. They wanted to create a fundamentalist Islamic emirate with Al Qaeda that spanned the Muslim world.*²⁹

Peter Bergen, an expert on al Qaeda, sees the issue in a similar fashion. For him the Taliban, Afghan and Pakistani, are brothers in arms with al Qaeda. In a 2009 article in the *New Republic* he wrote:

But, in recent years, Taliban leaders have drawn especially close to Al Qaeda. (There are basically two branches of the Taliban—Pakistani and Afghan—but both are currently headquartered in Pakistan, and they are quite a bit more interwoven

than is commonly thought.) Today, at the leadership level, the Taliban and Al Qaeda function more or less as a single entity. The signs of this are everywhere. For instance, IED attacks in Afghanistan have increased dramatically since 2004. What happened? As a Taliban member told Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau of Newsweek, “The Arabs taught us how to make an IED by mixing nitrate fertilizer and diesel fuel and how to pack plastic explosives and to connect them to detonators and remote-control devices like mobile phones. We learned how to do this blindfolded so we could safely plant IEDs in the dark.” Another explained that “Arab and Iraqi mujahedin began visiting us, transferring the latest IED technology and suicide-bomber tactics they had learned in the Iraqi resistance.” Small numbers of Al Qaeda instructors embedded with much larger Taliban units have functioned something like U.S. Special Forces do, as trainers and force multipliers.³⁰

A mid-level official affiliated with both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Mawlawi Omar, with perhaps a drop or two of exaggeration, trumpeted the unity of the Taliban and al Qaeda in a 2008 interview with Claudio Franco, an Italian regional specialist and journalist:

There is no difference between Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The formation of Al Qaeda and the Taliban was based on an ideology. Today, Taliban and Al Qaeda have become an ideology. Whoever works for these organizations, they fight against Kafirs [unbelievers]. . . . However, those fighting in foreign countries are called Al Qaeda while those fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan are

*called Taliban. In fact, both are the name of one ideology. The aim and objectives of both organizations are the same.*³¹

To be successful, reconciliation will have to practice “divide and conquer” and shatter the Taliban as an alliance of organizations. It will be the segments of the Taliban willing to disavow al Qaeda, along with the disgruntled, war-weary field cadres, who will meet the requirements for reconciliation. The death of Osama bin Laden at the hands of Navy SEALs in May 2011 may well accelerate reconciliation, but the bond between the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership is ideological as well as personal. Difficult as it will be, however, reconciliation has significant support and political momentum. Irregular conflicts rarely end in a surrender ceremony on a battleship, as World War II did, or with one side decisively defeating the other, as in the Vietnam War. Political compromises and negotiated settlements are the norm. Some last, and some do not. The Afghan government and its enemies know this history well. It will take years to set the conditions and conduct negotiations that lead to a lasting settlement.

To proceed systematically in Afghanistan, the United States and its coalition partners have to first reinforce the foundation for reconciliation efforts. To achieve favorable conditions for negotiations, ISAF must continue to accelerate its military efforts. General David Petraeus is correct: ISAF cannot kill or capture its way to victory in Afghanistan. Its forces must focus on protecting the population. At the same time, however, ISAF can create an enemy more eager to negotiate if it defeats Taliban offensive operations, destroys its field forces, dries up its means of support, damages its fundraising, disrupts the narcotics trade, and threatens its sanctuaries. Pakistan’s help can magnify the effects of ISAF’s efforts.

In the short run, large numbers of Afghan and NATO troops, as well as more civilian advisors and aid money, will be essential. In other words, the United States and its coalition partners must carry out President Obama's plan and pursue the enemy ruthlessly, rigorously, and continuously. Cutting off Taliban funds and support will be as important as destroying its cadres on the battlefield. The biggest mistake the coalition could make would be to slack off on the battlefield while the Taliban plays the talk-fight card.

In preparing for the future, the NATO nations must also continue to build Afghan police and military capacity for independent operations. We have done better at this in Iraq than in Afghanistan, but Iraq had more human capital and more sustained U.S. resources. Progress in building police and army formations was very impressive in 2010.³² Building across-the-board Afghan capacity for governance and management must also be a top long-term priority. In the end, better training and an increase in more military and civilian advisors may be more important than additional U.S. brigade combat teams.

At long last, Pakistan seems ready to pressure the Afghan Taliban and help with reconciliation. Beset by its own Taliban insurgents, the Pakistani leadership may well have concluded that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan is not in its interest. The government in Islamabad is no doubt eager to be shut of the radical Taliban. Again, more aid for Pakistan—military and economic—must be part of the reconciliation program, especially in the wake of the summer flooding in 2010. Working toward a long-term strategic partnership remains an important element in the equation.

Reconciliation and attendant negotiations are issues on which the Afghan government must lead. We cannot navigate the maze of Afghanistan's ethnic politics. Only the Afghan leadership can do that, and it has

been one of President Karzai's abiding strengths. One theme for our public diplomacy should be that the United States is in Afghanistan for the long haul—it will be there for years beyond the end of all major fighting. Another key theme should be continued support for Afghanistan while our combat troops are there as well as after they leave. U.S. diplomats have done a good job of emphasizing these themes. As long as the coalition is in Kabul, the Taliban knows it cannot force its way in. It must be made to believe that reconciliation is its best hope.

Political reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban (or any of its factions or field forces) should require the Taliban participants to accept a number of key conditions. The Taliban must verifiably lay down its arms. It must accept the Afghan constitution and agree to operate within it. It must also forsake the criminal enterprises that have become its lifeline and pledge to become a legitimate political entity inside Afghanistan. There should be no offers of territorial power sharing or extra constitutional arrangements, but later on the president might appoint Taliban cabinet officers or provincial or district governors. Taliban fighters could clearly be integrated into the ethnically integrated Afghan security forces after retraining and indoctrination.

Reintegration and reconciliation, first with individual fighters and then with elements of the Taliban, will be difficult but not impossible. It represents a potential way to end the 33 years of war that have beset this land. It will require great Western political, military, and economic effort during the reconciliation period and close attention to U.S.-Afghan relations in the long-term future. The cooperation of regional partners, especially Pakistan, will be critical. This process is likely to take years, but it carries with it the promise of the first peace in Afghanistan in over three decades.

In sterile decisionmaking exercises, teams might well decide that the safest way to proceed would be to go through these four options in order, starting with another dose of robust counterinsurgency programs, with coincident reintegration of individual belligerents. This would be followed by “Afghanization,” with reconciliation beginning only after option two is well underway. However, this is a time of rapid change on many fronts. Reconciliation, spurred by political maneuvering and war weariness, may end up leading and not following developments on the battlefield. Counterinsurgency successes in Pakistan can change the battlefield dynamics in Afghanistan and vice versa. Agreements among regional powers can affect military operations. The exploitation of mineral wealth may provide great incentives for some insurgents to come home and improve their economic lot.

There is an understandable reluctance to move into negotiations while the war continues, but as noted above, most irregular and civil wars end in some form of negotiation, often after a decade or more of fighting. The United States should not stand in the way of reconciliation with the Taliban. Rather, it should work for the best possible outcome, guided by its objectives, the available means, and the strategic context.